

Interview with COL Myron Harrington, USMC (Ret.), commanding officer of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Participant in the Battle of Hué City and the fight for the Citadel, February 1968. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 8 December 2005.

How did you get to Hué City?

We arrived by road convoy on the south side where Delta Company was initially made OPCON (operational control) to 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. We spent approximately 2 ½ days operating on the southern side with 2/5 before we got orders to rejoin 1/5. We then crossed over the river. It took us all day to do it. It was one of these discombobulated type moves in that I, the company CP, and a small security force went on an LCU in the middle of the morning. We received fire as we proceeded up the Perfume to the north side of the Citadel, which precluded the LCU's turning around to go back and get the remainder of the company. To make a long story short, the remainder of the company came up by South Vietnamese navy junks probably around 4 or 4:30.

What date was this?

This was on the evening of the 14th [February].

The bridge had already been blown by that time, hadn't it?

The bridge had been blown.

So going by river was the only way you could cross.

That's correct. And also by helicopters but, because of hostile activity, helicopters weren't an option.

You had company corpsmen with you. Did you have any physicians?

To my knowledge, the only medical personnel I had with me at that time were the organic company corpsmen.

What happened once you got to the other side of the river?

Once we got inside the Citadel area itself, we joined up with the battalion CP, settled the troops down in a bivouac area, and I reported to the commander for my instructions for the next day.

And what were those instructions?

Basically to participate in the attack as the battalion was moving from north to south inside the Citadel area. Specifically, the tasking was to take the Dong Ba Gate, which was a piece of high ground with a tower overlooking the battalion zone of action. The fact that the North Vietnamese held that and were able to bring suppression fires down on the battalion precluded our advance. The tower and the wall were up on the Citadel wall, which was a built-up area some 20 or 30 feet above the street. It provided the enemy with an elevated position to fire down on us. So it was a necessary objective we had to take in order to keep moving forward.

There must have been a tremendous number of casualties you were taking at that time.

On that particular day, the 15th, Delta Company alone lost six killed in action and had some 33 or so who were wounded and evacuated. There were some who were wounded but not evacuated; I don't know the exact number. But it was a significant number of casualties. I only had a hundred Marines to make the attack so I lost almost 40 percent that one day.

And you probably lost a few corpsmen along the way.

I don't think we actually lost a corpsman on that day. In checking back with some of the Marines who were with me, the day that stands out was on the 20th of January. That day we lost a gentleman named [HN Michael J.] Reinhold, who was a highly respected corpsman who went to great means to insure that he was able to take care of the Marines. The story that stands out is that somehow he had come across an Army style rucksack, which was much roomier than the Marine Corps packs that we had that time. He had filled it absolutely to the brim with medical supplies to ensure that he would be able to perform on the battlefield.

Since I spoke with you last, I've been able to contact Mr. Kent.

Wonderful!

And I conveyed your regards. We're going to do his oral history tomorrow.

Well, I think that that renders anything I would tell you a moot point because he can give it to you truly from the perspective of the corpsman on the ground. One of the other things I found out in discussing things with my other Marines is that in addition to the successful tracheotomy he did on LT Williams, I also understand that he attempted one on another Marine named Michaels but that Michaels died of his wounds. I think that just points out the extent that these young men would go to ensure the medical welfare of the Marines.

When I interviewed LGEN Christmas and LGEN Cheatham, we talked about what they encountered on the south bank. Both of them said that many of the wounds that were incurred were caused by secondary missiles. Because it was urban warfare, things would impact against concrete and steel and send other missiles flying in all directions. I imagine that you must have encountered the same kind of thing where you were fighting in the Citadel.

I think that I would have to concur with their statement. And I would have to tell you, in all honesty, that I wasn't paying attention to how a wound was received because I was concentrating on a multitude of other things at the time. But I can appreciate that with all the debris . . . and you can imagine if you have looked at any of the pictures of the utter devastation of the city with all the loose debris that was laying around, that a concussion type shock wave would certainly pick those up and hurl them about. So I would conclude that what they've said is right on the mark.

Did you come away yourself unscathed?

I was one of the lucky few. And I don't know how I came away without receiving a wound or losing my life. I thank God for that.

How long were you there trying to take your objectives in the Citadel?

We went into the Citadel on the evening of the 14th. The area was deemed secure I think around the end of February. Then we did some action on the outskirts to the east of the city,

policing up remnants of the North Vietnamese Army at that time. I think we actually left the city on or about the 5th of March.

What was the total percentage of casualties for Delta Company?

I really don't know the exact figures, but they were pretty high. I can tell you—and this is unofficial—that I got down to about 39 Marines. I got a replacement draft of approximately 50 Marines near the end of the battle and I remember my strength at that point being under 90 Marines. We took some fairly significant casualties. In some cases, the Marines had received multiple light wounds and would not be evacuated for a couple of days because we just didn't have the people in the line. I remember that one of my lieutenants was wounded in the attack on the tower on the 15th. I required him to stay around until he came up to me one day and said, "I can't move my leg anymore." So, at that point, I evacuated him. It was a desperate time and the necessity was that some Marines were left on the line who did have injuries that were not debilitating. Though they would have been painful and uncomfortable, those Marines showed great fortitude in sticking in there and staying with their friends as long as they could.

What means did you use to evacuate those who really required evacuation?

We collected the casualties from the company forward areas. Those who were walking wounded would be sent independently with an escort back to the battalion CP and aid station. We called up for a medical evacuation of those who were not ambulatory. This would be in the form of them bringing up what they called the "mule." It was a mechanical mini-jeep kind of thing with just a flat bed on it upon which we would transport supplies. It made an ideal delivery system to return casualties to the rear.

I think it was General Downs who pointed out that the number of Purple Hearts that were handed out to his folks were many times the number of troops who were employed, meaning that many of these Marines were wounded more than once but they stayed around.

That's affirmative.

He said that they would be treated at a battalion aid station and suddenly there they were again on their own initiative and ready for more.

That just shows the esprit that Marines in combat have for not wanting to leave their buddies in a bad spot.

Your troops had been fighting in Vietnam for some time but Hué was an anomaly in that it was urban fighting. Many of the other folks I've interviewed said, "These guys had been fighting in rice paddies, in the jungle, on hilltops. This was a whole new thing for them." They hadn't prepared themselves or knew what they were in for when they got into an urban setting. Did you find that to be the case?

Absolutely. There's no question that because of our lack of training, equipment, and knowledge of that kind of combat, it took us awhile to learn some very hard and painful lessons in order to be able to maximize our combat power to eliminate the NVA.

I guess you could say that it was OJT at its finest.

That's a nice way of putting it because it certainly was that.

Colonel, I want to thank you for spending some time with me today. I was mainly interested in the medical aspects of the Hué operation. You're really the first individual I've spoken with thus far who fought on the north side of the river. I've had a heck of time finding people. But I appreciate you sending me to Mr. Kent. He is very eager to talk with me.

He was really one of the unsung heroes of that battle with what he did to take care of the wounded and the dead. For him and the other corpsmen, I just have the highest admiration for their courage and their bravery.